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JAN 27 1976

Monsanto plans PCB phaseout

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By Kirk Scharfenberg

The Monsanto Chemical Co., the only domestic manufacturer of PCB and the firm which therefore supplies it to the General Electric Co. here, announced yesterday it would phase out production of the toxic substance "in a planned and orderly manner."

Monsanto, headquartered in St. Louis, announced no timetable for its plans, declaring that the phaseout would come after electric equipment manufacturers are satisfied that a substitute for PCB is available.

In recent months, following nationwide publicity about the health and environmental hazards of PCB, there has been what Business Week has described as a "marketing blitz" by suppliers offering PCB substitutes.

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However, electrical equipment manufacturers, including GE here, have questioned claims that an adequate substitute exists, especially for the transformers manufactured here. PCB is valued because it provides both the insulation required in electrical equipment and is resistant to fire. Therefore, the manufacturers say, it must be used in equipment designed for installation in congested areas to reduce the risks of fire.

PCB is shorthand for polychlorinated biphenyl. At GE here it is used in the transformer insulating fluid known as Pyranol.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency, which has expressed strong concern about the levels of PCB in the environment, including the levels that have recently been discovered in the Housatonic River downstream from GE here, maintains it has no authority to order a ban on PCB use, but EPA Administrator Russell Train has urged Monsanto customers to voluntarily cease using it.

However, this voluntary effort is [illegible] suitability of purported substitutes. Major electrical equipment manufacturers, according to some sources, are reluctant to stop using PCB for fear that customers, leery of substitute insulating fluids, will turn to competitors.

According to Glenn Schweitzer, director of the EPA's office of toxic substances, the EPA has no plans to conduct its own tests on the suitability of possible PCB substitutes.

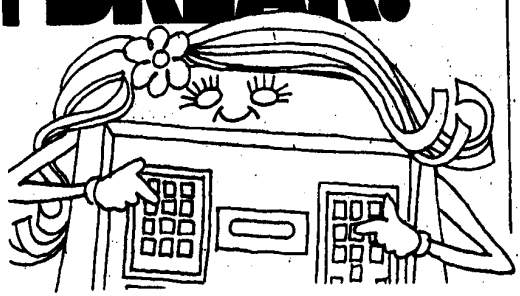
"We just plan to review what they (industries) do," Schweitzer said in a telephone interview from his Washington office. "We think that it's industry's responsibility. We don't think (the phasing out of PCB) is an impossible task, but we're not in a position to orchestrate how industry adjusts."

The strongest claim for a PCB substitute has come from the Dow Corning Co. which asserts that a silicone fluid it manufactures is "environmentally safe" and has the necessary insulating and flammability characteristics.

However, General Electric makes the very same substance and maintains that it has not yet proved to be an adequate substitute. GE claims it has studied 100

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possible substitutes for PCB but has yet to hit upon an adequate alternative.

The main problem is the silicone's flammability in comparison with PCB. On a scale of 1 to 100, PCB's flammability has been ranked at 2 to 3 by Underwriters Laboratories while the silicone fluid has been given a ranking of 4 to 5.

The hazards posed by PCB — it has been blamed for deforming skin diseases in Japan and reproductive failures in laboratory animals — are compounded because the substance does not biodegrade in the environment and tends to concentrate in the flesh of animals much like DDT.

Dow Corning maintains its silicone fluid will break down gradually when in contact with soil, decomposing to silica — a substance chemically the same as sand.

However, an EPA spokesman said in the view of his agency the silicone fluid's "environmental safety hasn't been proven yet."

The use of a silicone fluid would, according to Dow Corning, increase the cost of large transformers by 10 to 20 per cent, but the company maintains the price rise would be offset by cheaper handling procedures. Cost is less of a factor in capacitors, the other major piece of electrical equipment in which PCB is used, because they use substantially less insulating fluid.

The problem of finding an adquate substitute for PCB in transformers is further complicated because, according to a recent issue of the respected trade journal Electrical World, "the flash and fire points are often approached."

The McGraw-Edison Co.'s power systems division has recently announced with Dow Chemical Co. that it has developed a suitable substitute for PCB in capacitors, but says it is not acceptable for transformers. About 25 per cent of the PCB manufactured, according to Electrical World, is used in capacitors. The Sprague Electric Co. in North Adams uses PCB in capacitors.

McGraw-Edison claims the fluid for capacitors developed with Dow has been shown to have no toxic effects on laboratory animals and biodegrades significantly faster than PCB. McGraw-Edison plans to begin using the new fluid in commercial quantities in its capacitors in the middle of this year.

The development of a PCB substitute for capacitors or transformers will not end the PCB threat to health or the environment.

According to the EPA, about 700 million pounds of PCB have been manufactured since 1929, when the substance was first introduced for a wide variety of industrial applications. About 200 million pounds, according to the EPA, has been discharged into the environment.

The EPA says its knows no way to remove it. Concentrations of PCB in the Housatonic River sediment have been blamed for PCB levels discovered in fish there that are seven times the federal health standard.

While GE here claims that through the use of a high-intensity incinerator it has curbed the discharge of new PCB into the environment here, residues from pipes, drains and the soil built up over 40 years of relatively uncontrolled use are still reaching the Housatonic at the rate of about one-quarter pound a day.

The Monsanto announcement yesterday that it would phase out PCB production "as soon as we are satisfied that the electric power supply industry's needs for an usable, acceptable dielectric fluids have been met" followed by five years a 1971 decision by the company to limit PCB sales to manufacturers of closed electric systems. Previously, it had been used in a variety of products including paper, paints and sealers.

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